

BACKGROUND ON MOVE OF YMCA ALLEY PROGRAM TO EDWARD VII SCHOOL

General

International YMCA is located at Park Avenue and St. Viateur, about 2½ blocks away from Edward VII School. The district, known as Mile End West, is bounded by Van Horne on the North, St. Lawrence on the East, Pine Avenue on the South and Hutchison Street on the West.

Mile End was identified in 1966 in a study by the Conseil des Oeuvres as one of the seven "grey areas" in Montreal. It is an area of poverty, high unemployment and under-employment, poor housing and few recreation outlets. It exhibits most of the characteristics of an "inner city" area, i.e. broken families, high crime and delinquency rates, high rate of street accidents, school drop-outs, youth gangs, drinking and drug problems, and more insidiously, feelings on the part of the population, of futility and despair at their inability to affect their environment or cope with stresses of 20th century urban life.

Role of the YMCA, Past and Present

The YMCA has been a part of this community for many years, originally North Branch, and since 1951 as International YMCA, due to its efforts to relate more directly to the largely immigrant multi-ethnic population. The branch is known throughout the city for its achievements in the field of language instruction and every year more than 2000 students of up to 47 nationalities receive instruction in either French or English.

In 1966, as part of a city-wide re-assessment of the Y's role in the community, the branch re-affirmed its commitment to serve the Mile End area, as its top priority and accepted a strong recommendation from a research committee studying the area, that the role of the International Branch become that of a community development agency rather than as in the past, a membership-serving organization. Traditional programs have been maintained but they attract, at least in youth programs, four members from Park Extension and other areas to everyone attracted from Mile End.

Inter-Agency Co-operation

One of the primary functions of an agency concerned with community development should be to work for the maximum utilization of existing community facilities and the development of co-operative relationships between institutions in the community. Progress has been made in involving churches in Mile End in co-operative projects with youth and adults.

More and more university students are seeing a role for themselves in the affairs of the community and in view of the new approach of this branch and its commitment to work for better conditions in a deprived area, are coming forward to volunteer their time and experience to work on the problems of youth. Many of these volunteers have considerable training and experience and are highly qualified for the work. Also, ways are opening to provide agencies working in the community with the resources available in university social science departments.

Learnings from the alley project - 1969

One of the main reasons for the turnout of 700 children for this program, was found to be that the program took place right in the children's daily milieu. The reluctance of people in this area to participate in programs in buildings like the YMCA (quite apart from restricted space available and relevance of program) lies in the fact that they had to leave their regular surroundings and take the often anxiety-producing step of entering what amounts to a foreign institution which they have never identified as being concerned with them. This applies especially to children whose reception in buildings other than their own home and school is often hostile.

The project took place in 5 closed-off lanes which were just tolerable as playgrounds during the summer months, but, of course, are of no use at all during the other seasons. The Alley Project was aimed at providing recreation and supervision for children who otherwise would have been on the streets all summer. But the problem exists during the school year, from 3:30 till 6:00 p.m., since many mothers in that area are working and children are on the streets from the time school gets out until parents come home from work.

Physical Recreation

Student-volunteers collaborate with Physical Education staff in providing supervision for after-school games and sports programs, thus making extra-curricular participation available to more and more children. This focus is seen as complementary to programs run by the Physical Education Department which may already be taking place.

Arts and Creative Work

Art and drama students set up programs on children's creativity and its development.

Group Programs

A primary need for children in this age range is for participation in group situations with their peers. It has been found that children as young as 8 years old are capable of making considered decisions in groups, on topics that concern them. Thus a suggested program thrust would be in group centred rather than activity centred areas--small groups of children working with an adult advisor (student-volunteer) to plan their own activities. Such activities could involve tours and visits to places of interest, museums, planetarium, etc, and the YMCA swimming pool is available free for the use of such groups. The advisor's task is to help children actively develop their own programs around their own interests and needs.

Tutorials

Senior university students working on specific subject problems with children referred to them by teachers.

French and English instruction could be a major part of this in our area, with language specialists in the school directing children to the program and working as consultants with student-instructors.

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